

January 22, 2023

FIXING OUR EYES ON ETERNITY

Psalm 73

(12 of 12 in a series of selected Psalms)

I'm a generally happy guy. I haven't battled being depressed too often in my life—though I can think of a few occasions. One of those times was when I was in high school. I've shared before that the Lord had been incredibly gracious to me from third grade to seventh grade. We lived in the Eastern part of Kentucky, and I'd developed a group of close friends who were serious about following the Lord. It was such a blessing to me that it'd be hard for me to overstate the positive influence these friends had in my life. My desire to honor the Lord and seek to obey him from my childhood on was mainly brought about through the positive influence and examples of these friends. I thank God for them.

But I didn't stay in that happy place for long. We moved to Western Kentucky at the time I was going into eighth grade. And if my previous years had been like a watered garden, this was like entering a dry and weary desert. I wouldn't have a male Christian friend until the very last semester of my senior year. I went to a public high school where I would try to ignore the conversations my friends were having around me about their sexual activities, which was all the more difficult when they sought to speak directly to me. Any time I joined up with a group of guys to hang out outside of school it was only worse. So, I spent less and less time as I advanced through high school hanging out with my peers. And I was quite discouraged and depressed.

What is embarrassing to admit is that some of my depression and discouragement stemmed from the reality that I was envious of those around me. I wanted to obey the Lord, but the fight against my own temptations was, well, a fight. I might find myself interested in some girl only to watch her chase after one of my friends who would then brag to me about their sin together. So, I'd be angry with him, jealous of him, wishing I had what he had, while also knowing that I didn't want to go down that road. And there were times in my envy that my knees almost buckled and I thought, "Why am I even trying to walk in purity?" After all, the lives of those around me who weren't trying at all seemed so great, and here I was, feeling discouraged and depressed.

Maybe you can relate. Maybe you're in a very similar place as to what I've described, and you feel your faith growing weak. Your knees are starting to buckle, and you just don't feel like you're able to keep fighting the fight of faith. Maybe it's because those at work around you who are bending the ethical guidelines are excelling why you're falling behind. Maybe it's because your friends are finding a husband by attracting them with elements that the Lord frowns on but men can (sadly) be drawn to. Maybe you're simply watching those around you pursue man's applause, and they're getting it, while you seek to please God rather than man, but it's weighing on you to watch others receive praise. You may be discouraged. You're growing weak. And you're envious. Maybe, if you're honest, you're even a little disappointed that God would allow

things to unfold around you as they are. And if that's you, I've got some good news for you, and I've got some even better news. Let's start with the good news.

The good news is that you're not the first to battle with these things—and I don't say that because I was battling it back in the 80s and 90s. I say it because of Psalm 73. Psalm 73 is written by Asaph, who, we'll see this morning, walked where you're walking, felt what you felt, and actually said it out loud. All the things you're battling and feeling right now that you'd be embarrassed to confess, he not only confessed them but wrote them down as Holy Scripture, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. You're not alone, and you're not even close to being the first person feeling the way you're feeling right now. That's the good news.

Now, the even better news. Asaph shows us how to walk through it and come out on the other side. In other words, Psalm 73 isn't inviting us to a pity party or merely to wallow in our disappointment. The Psalm ends with him saying, "But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works" (v. 28). So, how did he get there? The answer to that question begins in verse 17, but before we get there, let's look at Asaph and his confession of his struggles in verses 1-16. And the great benefit of this is showing you that he struggled every bit as much as you may well be struggling today.

Asaph's confession

Let's walk through these first sixteen verses to see his struggle. He begins by acknowledging what he knows to be true in his mind. He knows the right answer for the theology test. He writes, "Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart" (v. 1). He knows that's true in his mind. It's just like when you face disappointment and you might say, "I know God withholds no good thing from his children, but . . ." and then you go on to note what good thing it *feels* like he's withholding from you. That's what Asaph is doing to start the Psalm. He's saying, "I know God is good to Israel, to those who are true in heart, but . . ." He's struggling.

So, he writes, "But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped" (v. 2). In other words, what he's saying is that even though he knows in his mind that God is good and does good to those pure in heart, he was tempted to walk away from the Lord, to turn away from his faith. He'd lived his life confessing his faith in the Lord, but his knees were beginning to buckle. He didn't know if he could hold fast to his faith. Why?

He says in verse 3, "I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked." When he looked at people that he knew were living lives of rebellion against God, everything seemed to be like roses and lilies for them. They were prospering. Their lives looked better than his. And this was before social media. Imagine how much more intense his envy and struggles would be if he could get a glimpse of the best portion of everyone else's life every second of every day.

So, he tells us what the lives of the wicked looked like to him in verses 4-12. Here's his description:

vv. 4-5 – They’re healthy (to say someone was fat was obviously a compliment at this time and place) and free from the kind of troubles that it seems the righteous face.

v. 6 – They’re full of pride. They don’t feel all the insecurities and doubts that haunt him. When you’ve sat in your room and cried because you just feel like you’re not enough in comparison to everyone else, well, they’ve never felt that, he tells us. And, if that’s not enough, they’re violent, seeking to harm their neighbor.

v. 7 – They have all they desire. When it says “their eyes swell out through fatness,” that’s an idiom telling us that they have what they desire. They see it, they want it, and it’s theirs. They’re not the lonely ones. They have the amazing spouse, great job, and wonderful life. They’ve got riches, athletic ability, intelligence, good looks. It’s theirs. They want it, they got it. Their hearts overflow with foolish behaviors, but it never seems to bite them.

vv. 8-10 – But their riches and blessings in all these areas don’t make them gentle and understanding toward others who don’t. Rather, they are arrogant. They speak condescendingly. They speak against God, even proudly. People even seem to be ignorant of their faults—or at least unwilling to point them out. And as Asaph looks at them, it just highlights all he doesn’t have and all he isn’t.

vv. 11-12 – It seems like God isn’t caring about what they’re doing. They’re flaunting their sinful lives, even suggesting that God won’t do anything about it. And all the while, they’re increasing in riches and ease. Everything is smooth and nice and easy for them.

And then Asaph looks at himself, and he begins to question why he is working so hard to walk in faith and faithfulness. He says in verses 13, “All in vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.” It just seems like it’s not worth it. He’s trying to walk in purity, and those who are not pursuing holiness—and even flaunting their sin—are prospering. And so, he’s afflicted with this perception of their blessing and his struggle every day (v. 14).

Then it gets worse. As he’s questioning, doubting, and feeling like walking in faithful obedience to the Lord isn’t even worth it, he realizes he can’t tell anyone how he’s feeling. He says in verse 15, “If I had said, ‘I will speak thus,’ I would have betrayed the generation of your children.”

Do you see what he’s saying? He’s in a position where others look up to him. He’s a leader of sorts so it seems in the faithful community. And he wants to scream, “I’m struggling to hold to my faith in the Lord!” but he knows that if he says that others who look to him could be shaken to their core. So, he keeps silent about the turmoil he feels in his soul, and every time he contemplates everything, it’s wearying to him. He feels exhausted just thinking about it. That’s Asaph’s confession.

Here is one who has struggled where some of us have, or maybe where we’re struggling right now. And, if you say, “But I’m full of envy;” so was he. “But I have even questioned if obedience

is worth it;” so did he. “But my faith itself is shaky;” so was his. “But I don’t feel like I can even admit that to anyone;” neither did he. “But I feel worn down because I can’t quit wrestling with all of these things;” so did he. Asaph wasn’t saying he had some kind of superficial, surface-level struggle. His faith was shaken, and he was questioning his commitment to keep following after the Lord in obedience.

So, how did he come out of it? And, for that matter, how can we fight the fight of faith in these moments? Let me list two things from the second half of this psalm. First, we must remember eternity.

We must remember eternity

We must remember that this life isn’t all there is. Asaph tells us in verse 17 that everything changed when he walked into the sanctuary that day. When he went to the house of the Lord, something happened. I don’t know if it’s because someone was giving instruction from the Law of Moses that day or what happened, but all of the sudden, his eyes were lifted beyond this world. He tells us, “Until I went into the sanctuary of God, then I discerned their end” (v. 17).

He goes on to talk about how those who are in rebellion against the Lord are “destroyed in a moment,” “swept away,” “like a dream when one awakes” (vv. 18-20). And this is not some exception for how the psalms speak of the wicked. Psalm 1 says the wicked “are like chaff that the wind drives away.” Psalm 2 tells us that they are like the dust left when a potter breaks the pot into pieces. Psalm 9 tells us their names are blotted out forever and ever and memories of them perish.

In a word, he remembered the Lord’s judgment. All of those whom he was envying, who were making him wonder if he was obeying the Lord in vain, they were going to face judgment. If you’re full of envy toward unbelievers, and their seeming prosperity in this life is making you wonder whether following Jesus is even worth it, just remember eternity. They will one day face the judgment of God. If they don’t repent and believe in Jesus—who lived and died and was raised for us—they’re going to be thrown into hell. And the Bible doesn’t pull punches here. It’s not as embarrassed to talk about judgment as we sometimes can be.

Scripture paints the eternal judgment of hell as a fire which is not quenched (Mark 9:44). It’s referred to as outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt 25:30). And the torment of unbelievers in hell is said to be night and day forever and ever without rest (Rev 14:11). This is terrible imagery. And it’s why Jesus asks what it profits a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul. The reality is that it profits him nothing. The day of judgment will only be full of regret for him. The person who is chasing after sin, flaunting it, and seems to be getting out of life its most precious rewards so that you envy him, he is facing eternal judgment unless he repents. There is simply no basis for envy. Asaph remembered that, and it strengthened his shaky legs.

Our problem in those moments when we are caught up in envy and we start to waver in our own desire for obedience is that we've lost sight of eternity. We're living and thinking as if this life is all there is. And if that's true, sure, chase after sin. Pursue fleeting pleasures. But because eternity is real, you should realize that the one you're tempted to envy should actually be the object of your pity. Instead of coveting all that she has, you should be praying for her to repent. And Asaph realizes as he contemplates the end of unbelievers that he'd been like a "ignorant brute" and beast toward God. He writes in verses 21-22, "When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you."

Here he was wallowing in envy and self-pity, secretly disappointed with God in his heart, and regretting that he'd walked in purity and obedience, when all of the sudden he remembered eternity. And not only did he realize the end of those whom he envied, but he remembered his own end as well. He writes in verses 23-24, "Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory."

It's not just that God's enemies will face his judgment; it's also true that those who trust in the Lord will receive eternal life. We'll be gathered to glory. And we don't deserve it. The only thing that makes us different from those who will face God's judgment is grace. We don't contribute one thing toward our righteous standing before God on the day of judgment. It's completely what Jesus has done for us. We're justified by faith alone. We place our faith in the crucified and risen Lord, and our sins are forgiven, and we are credited with his perfect righteousness. If your faith is in Christ, your end of time judgment has already been declared. Jesus is yours, and everything he's done and is counts for you. You're declared righteous in him. Isn't that amazing? We can't lose sight of that either. We can only wallow in a place like Asaph describes in verses 1-16 if we forget eternity and set our focus in this life only. So, first, we remember eternity. And, second, we must remember that God gives himself to us now.

We must remember that God gives himself to us now

In other words, the message of Psalm 73 isn't simply, "Yeah, life here is bad, but we've got eternity." That would be enough. But it's also, that God has given himself to us now. Notice in verses 23-28 how Asaph interweaves the realities that he'll be with the Lord in eternity but also that God is present with him now and comforts him. He writes, "Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works."

Asaph mentions that God is continually with him, holding his hand, guiding him, strengthening him, near him, and his refuge. The Lord constantly strengthens us with the reminder of his presence. He tells us that he is with us and will not leave us nor forsake us.

I mentioned that hard time in high school, but I can also tell you that in those moments when I felt alone, I wasn't alone. The Lord was with me. And I grew close to him in those moments of struggle in a way that I probably would not have—through my own neglect—if life had gone as smoothly as I'd have preferred. Our God is with us, and he's working in us in ways we can only imagine.

So, how do we keep our knees from buckling or turning away from obeying the Lord in faith when we see the prosperity of the wicked and envy them? We remember eternity—theirs and ours. And we remember the closeness of our God to us. He loves us. He loves us enough that he sent his Son to die and be raised for us. He loves us enough that he sent his Spirit to indwell us. And he loves us enough that he is always with us—even when it feels that no one else is. Therefore, we close the service by remembering his love and his presence as we come to the table. Amen.